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ABSTRACT

A researcher involved with the study of deafness covers such topics as prevalence of deafness, educational placement options, and statistics on special education programs for the deaf and hard of hearing. Among findings of the Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth are that only 10% of special programs report genetic counseling for parents; nearly 66% of all special programs subscribe to a total communication approach; reading achievement of the median 19 year old deaf student leaving school is at a fourth grade equivalent; and severity of hearing loss and family socioeconomic status are the two most powerful determiners of educational outcome. (CL)

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# OVERVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH WITH HEARING IMPAIRED PEOPLE

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Those of us who have (happily!) been seduced into entering and remaining with the field of research and service with hearing impaired people, and especially with hearing impaired children, have for a long time been guarding our secret, but we are now more ready to invite our psychological colleagues to join us in this most fascinating area. As a people worthy of service and research, hearing impaired people have been underserved and understudied, as regards both the quantity and the quality of research and service. This is the greater shame since the issues and problems in deafness strike at the heart of many of the concerns of greatest relevance to psychology throughout its history -- concerns such as the nature of communication and language, the ways in which personality and behavior are shaped in a culture, questions of learning and of teaching, the impact on the psychological organization of the individual when a major channel of ordinary psychological structure is absent or limited. It is for reasons such as these that linguists, for example, have begun to take increasing interest in the study of the sign languages of deaf communities around the world. The development of scientific constructs requires at least two examples from which to draw abstraction about the similarities and differences of the classes of entities represented by the two examples. Until attention was focused by linguists on these non-vocal languages, the only available examples of human language were all representatives of a single class: vocal languages. Not until the second concrete representation of language, such as the manual sign language of the deaf communities, was made an object of scientific attention, could higher-order theories or abstractions about the nature

and functions of human language be developed. In comparable ways, examination of the psychological attributes of deaf person can prove heuristically fruitful in general for the student of human psychology.

But more to the point for me is the study of deaf people in themselves, for what they are and what they are becoming. It is obviously impossible to do much in the few minutes allotted to a conference presentation, but I will try to highlight a few of the more salient bits of information and theory about deaf people as a way of introducing this fascinating portion of humanity to you.

Though you may see figures printed occasionally, no one knows with any exactitude the number of deaf and hard of hearing people in the world. In this country a National Census of the Deaf Population was conducted in 1971 by the National Association of the Deaf in conjunction with the New York University Deafness Research and Training Center (Schein & Delk, 1974). At that time there were 13.4 million persons with hearing impairments of one sort or another, making impairment of hearing the single most prevalent chronic physical disability in the United States. Of this number, about half or 6.5 million had a significant level of hearing impairment in both ears. Among these, fully 1.8 million were deaf, meaning that they could not hear and understand speech. Of this number, 410,000 acquired their deafness before reaching age 19.

A special research program known as the Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth has been conducted at Gallaudet College on a national scale since 1968, paying special attention to the school-age population of hearing impaired children whose impairment was of sufficient severity to warrant placement in a special education program of some sort, whether a special school or special class, or in regular classes with one or more special supportive

services. Our best estimate of the number of such children is about 70,000, with individual data on more than 55,000 of these being reported annually to this special research program. The rest of what I will have to say will be drawn from the studies conducted and published as a result of this Annual Survey.

We know that the vast majority of these children attend special schools or classes, and that those who are placed in "mainstream" settings with only some supportive services are primarily hard of hearing rather than deaf, from higher income families, with a greater proportion of post-lingual onset of hearing loss, and the like. The recent emphasis on public education in local school districts for handicapped children has led to an increase of the number of children being served in these "mainstream" settings, but these additional children are apparently newly discovered cases, generally hard of hearing, etc., as described above, and are very much like the children previously served in the same programs. On a national scale there is little evidence that these programs have been capable of serving substantial numbers of severely to profoundly deaf children who have been served by special schools and classes.

There are somewhat more than 1,000 organized special education programs serving these children in the U.S., with approximately 170 of these being special schools for the deaf, another 80 to 90 being schools for multiply handicapped children which serve multiply handicapped deaf children (not all do), and the remaining 750 to 800 programs are conducted under the auspices of local school districts. The size of these programs ranges from a median enrollment of about 250 in a residential school for the deaf to a median of 17 in school districts which offer full time special classes scattered throughout local public schools.

The nature and quality of these programs necessarily also varies greatly. While the large majority (74%) of all such special programs provide puretone audiometric testing, there is the other 26% which do not provide this elementary service. Sometimes quality varies by type of program. While, for example, 75% of special day schools for the deaf check the child's hearing aid daily, only 6% of the districts providing support service in a mainstream setting do likewise. Only 10% of all programs report paying any formal attention to genetic counseling for parents, although half or more of all hearing loss among children is due to genetic factors. The question of how best to communicate with hearing impaired children, whether through a primarily auditory/aural/oral approach or by means of sign language, fingerspelling, or other visual/manual methods has been a hotly contested issue for more than a hundred years. While the debate continues, the available data suggest that the large majority (about two thirds) of all special programs in the country now subscribe to a "total communication" philosophy, which stresses the right of the child to communication by whatever method, and which generally espouses trying to use a combination of spoken and signed messages supplemented by other approaches as needed.

Regardless of educational approach, the results of education as measured by standardized achievement tests and by ratings of speech intelligibility are not greatly encouraging. Reading achievement of the median 19-year old deaf child leaving school is at the equivalent of the fourth-grade level, or barely enough for newspaper literacy. Similarly, more than half of all hearing impaired children are rated as having speech which is barely intelligible or worse. The two most powerful determiners of educational outcome presently appear to be the severity of the hearing loss (with greater severity leading to less adequate results) and the socioeconomic level of the child's family (higher

SES is related to higher achievement and better intelligibility).

Personal and social development are, of course, other goals of education and of the maturation process, but there are problems here as well. Meadow and Trybus (1979) conclude that the literature in general supports the statement that " the prevalence of such (emotional/behavioral) disorders is three to six times as high among deaf children as it is among hearing children." Despite this situation, mental health and counseling services are shamefully far from adequate to the need. Goulder (1976) concluded that at best, with the most conservative estimate of the need for mental health service and the most limited definition of the deaf population, only 17% of the need for psychological service was being provided. With less conservative estimates of need and less delimited definitions of the population, the proportion of the existing need being served diminishes to the 1% to 2% range. Clearly there is a great need for personnel, facilities, and services in this area as well.

To sum up a somewhat disjointed, rambling presentation, my main message is that much has been done, but much more remains to be done -- and that the doing is humane and rewarding work, both for deaf people themselves and for those of us whose professional activity is directed toward earning the right to serve.

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